DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 303 184 IR 052 635

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TITLE Amelia Bedelia in the Library or Effective Communication for Leadership.
PUB DATE 10 Jul 88
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Library Administration and Management Association President's Program at the Annual Convention of the American Library Association (New Orleans, LA, July 10, 1988).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Communication Skills; Decision Making; *Leadership Qualities; *Library Administration; Library Personnel; *Motivation; Needs Assessment; Role Models; *Verbal Communication

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses ways in which how both formal and informal library leaders can utilize communication principles to persuade, motivate, and build positive employee relations. Noting that effective communication takes time, it is suggested that administrators talk with, not to, individual staff members, and that they (1) use direct eye contact; (2) appear approachable; (3) be cognizant of tone and nonverbal expression in addition to the words being articulated; (4) do not assume communication is taking place on the same wavelengths; (5) repeat/paraphrase what was said in order to clarify; (6) be empathetic; (7) follow up on interactions; (8) offer and solicit feedback; and (9) do not mainstream without giving a rational reason. In addition to individual communication encounters with staff members, it is recommended that the library leader meet regularly with departmental and branch staff in informational meetings and focus groups to encourage communication flow on those levels. The paper concludes with a discussion of the primary responsibilities of the library director, which are identified as the development and maintenance of trust among staff; absorption of stress; giving credit to staff; serving as a role model; keeping negative occurrences in their proper perspective; recognizing the importance of each staff position; involving staff in the decision-making process affecting their area of job responsibility; and being flexible. (CGD)

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AMELIA BEDELIA IN THE LIBRARY

or EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION FOR LEADERSHIP

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July 10, 1988

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Amelia Bedelia in the Library

OR Effective Communication for Leadership

We sit in our offices, phone to our right, routing slips, post-it notes and memo forms to our left, paper clips and pens front and center. These are our tools of communication. Note I did not mention feet. That is because we library leaders are so busy listening to ourselves talk and generating memos that we seldom step outside the administrative doors to see the library world as it is seen by library staff.

We issue memorandums stating what and how procedures should be implemented, but seldom WHY. Seldom, the Big Picture.

We form committees who work for weeks or months on a project, and ignore or disregard their input. Seldom, one-on-one, asking "What do you think? Why do you think that way?"

We are like Amelia Bedelia, the character in Peggy Parish's stories. Amelia Bedelia views everything from her experience and point-of-reference, without questioning others or seeking real communication. If she is told to "dress the turkey" she puts a tuxedo on it. When asked to draw the drapes, she sits down with paper and pencil. Amelia is a delightful character who causes giggles by readers. But when Amelia Bedelia is personified as library leaders, it is no longer funny. Lack of direct, person-to-person, meaningful

communication among library leaders and staff results in staff grousing, morale problems, inefficiency, low productivity and even sabotage.

Today, I intend to discuss with you how we, as formal and informal leaders in our libraries, can stop the detrimental communication patterns such as those used by our friend Amelia Bedelia. We will discuss, using specific examples, how to talk WITH, not TO our staff. We will learn how we can improve library service by providing for staff input in decision-making at all levels. And we will find out how to formalize the grapevine into a viable communication forum via focus groups.

The information contained in this paper is based on practical experience culled from personal experience as a page, substitute, desk clerk, reference librarian, children's librarian, audiovisual librarian, cataloguer and supervisor. Ten years of library experience at six libraries, working with persons of diverse personalities and skills are meshed here to form the framework of these communication techniques. These communication principals are oriented to libraries with fifty or less staff members and have proven to be effective in creating a cohesive, cooperative library staff.

Communication may alienate or motivate your library staff. Today we will explore the nuances that can make or break a library leader's communication with staff.

Effective communication takes time -- no excuses. It is easy to say, "I'll talk to the branch library assistants

tomorrow." Tomorrow comes and you decide that writing the narrative portion of the annual report is more pressing than people. Wrong. One of the most important keys to effective communication, especially as it relates to leadership, is that people are more important than papers. We are all keenly aware of the mountain of paperwork, the myriad meetings and the general hustle and bustle required of the library leader's time. Such time constraints do not excuse you from talking to your staff, face-to-face. Let each staff member know that his or her input is listened to, valued, and acted upon.

Direct eye contact communicates to the speaker that you are actively listening to what is being said. Avoid being preoccupied with your thoughts so that you can rush in with your ideas on the subject being discussed. Know when to be quiet and simply listen. Then you can react to what actually has been said, not what you half-heard was said.

Appearing approachable is important if you plan to maintain open, day-to-day communication with staff. Say good morning and goodnight to every employee you pass. Do not appear to be so rushed that they are intimidated to talk to you.

In one-on-one communication with a staff member, be cognizant of tone and nonverbal expressions in addition to the words being articulated. Learn how and when to solicit more communication. If the audio-visual clerk says, "Sure, I agree with the proposed compact disc selection policy" and you note a sarcastic or negative tone, pursue the issue, don't simply

allow the discrepency to pass. You might respond with "I sense you may have some reservations about the policy. Would you care to express them? I am very interested in knowing what you think, since you handle the nonprint materials everyday. Your input is important to us and may help the library operate more efficiently."

Don't fall into the Amelia Bedelia trap by assuming that you and the staff member are communicating on the same wavelength. Ask questions if you need clarification regarding terms or concepts and encourage the staff member to do the same. If the Head of Technical Services tells you that you need 1800 new megabytes to intercept the buffer zone of the M3000 whatsitz and it will cost x dollars divided by the projected output of the input and you do not know what she is talking about, admit it. Pride or ego protection has no place in effective communication.

As necessary, repeat or paraphrase what the speaker said, to ensure clarification. For example, if your Acquisitions Librarian tells you that eight publishers raised the price of serials 35%, for a total increase of $2500.00, you might respond, "So that means that such and such titles now cost us x amount?" Don't take facts or details for granted. Communication requires clarification at many stages and levels.

In addition to clarification skills, empathy is needed to effectively communicate with the staff. The library leader needs to put herself in the employee's shoes. Do not make unreasonable demands and expect staff to be reasonable in

responding to such edicts. Do not expect the staff to willingly perform tasks they cannot perceive you doing. Before you ask a page to shelve four hours without a break, try it yourself. No kidding. The experience will also give you an appreciation for the effort and skill that is required for all library tasks. If you are recruiting volunteers to organize a book sale, make sure you have weeded and sorted many books and experienced dust in your nose. The means to empathizing is experiencing.

A lot of communication is like a message in a bottle -- you send it, it floats along and one never knows where it might come ashore. Not following-up on interactions is as meaningless as never having interacted. If a branch librarian tells you she needs lower shelving for preschool books and you say, "Yeas, fine, great idea" and take no action, that message is lost and the branch librarian will be justifiably angry or frustrated. Respond to all communication, even if it is simply "I'll think about it and get back to you." Another key communication tip: follow-up is fruitful in promoting positive staff relations.

Feedback is essential to avoid counter-productive festering of real and imagined staff complaints or concerns. It is wise for the library leader to maintain an open door policy that enables staff to stop by and air concerns, rather than having them go the route of the grapevine, which tends to exaggerate and worsen even minor concerns. A broken faucet in the staff bathroom takes on the proportion of the monster that

ate New York, as graphic depictions of the disrepair spread from branch to branch. But if a staff member can stop by the Director's office and say, "The faucet in the staff bathroom is broken" and you make a note to talk to the custodian, the situation is resolved. It does not become grist for the "look at our poor working conditions" mill. Festering hurts can lead to serious communication sickness. Deal with concerns as they arise.

The communication principals discussed build positive employee relations via effective communication using a simple S.T.E.P. process:

Stop thinking of fifty issues and concentrate on the one at hand

Take time to hear and listen

Empathize

Process information and develop and implement a solution

Communication often serves as a means of persuasion or motivation. We try to convince staff to shelve more books per hour, assertively approach patrons to request if they need assistance, or catalog nonprint items using a new classification scheme. How staff responds to such persuasion depends on the library leader's communication skills. Persuading staff to do something requires that you explain the who, what, when, where, why and how of the proposed action.

Yes, if you simply told a staff member to "do it this way" she is obligated to do so. But if you convince that staff member to do something, there is a key difference: satisfaction. And job satisfaction results in higher productivity, less absenteeism, higher morale and loyalty to the organization. Directives from above may make the library leader feel important, but the reaction from the front-liners is usually "what and why?" If it does not make sense, staff will perform the task half-heartedly, or worse, will do it wrong. You do not want 452,315 bar code labels affixed upside-down, do you?

Consistency is another important component of motivating employees. Do not change midstream without giving a rational reason. If last month you wanted the new books list annotated and this month you do not, tell the staff why. Moodiness and mind-changes muddle communication channels.

Communication needs to be dynamic, not static. Solicit input and feedback from the entire staff. Each one has special skills and worthwhile ideas to contribute about library operations. If you limit solicitation for suggestions to departments, you will be eliminating the possibility of terrific ideas from other sources. A custodian or circulation clerk can have ideas for summer reading programs as clever as a children's librarian's.

In addition to individual communication encounters with staff members, it is important for the library leader to regularly meet with departmental and branch staff. There are

two important types of meetings: informational and focus groups.

Informational meetings highlight exchange and sharing of day-to-day operations, policies and procedures, updates, etc. These meetings should have an agenda and follow the K.I.S.S. rule: Keep It Simple and Short. K.I.S.S. meetings are a systematic, efficient approach to communication. They convey the most information, in the easiest mode, to the appropriate target group, at the right time. These meetings should follow a regular schedule, such as Materials Selection Committee - every 3rd Thursday of the month at 1:30, Department Head meetings, every 2nd Tuesday of the month at 9:00 a.m.

Sharing ideas at informational meetings creates a unity of purpose and can motivate productivity. Comparing branch circulation statistics and analyzing how each librarian tries to increase use of the library is a form of innocuous competition. Going around the table asking each participant to share a book she has read recently generates interest in readers advisory service and also helps staff learn about each others strengths and interests.

Focus groups are meetings that are convened as needed, to air differences, discuss "hot" issues, and deal immediately with pressing staff concerns. Issues that warrant focus groups, in which honest thoughts and opinions are shared in a climate of trust and confidentiality, might include personnel issues such as a personality clash between a branch librarian and her assistant, a violent interaction between a staff member

and patron or debating the value or feasibility of merit raises or reducing branch hours of service. Perhaps it is necessary to discuss the branch librarian who is "acting funny." Some one in the focus group may be aware that her erratic behavior is caused by side effects from medication. This information allows the library leader to handle the situation in an appropriate manner. Whatever is being discussed, participants must be aware that discretion is imperative concerning such sensitive topics.

Focus groups need not turn into gripe sessions. Discussion should be directed to the issue being confronted and each participant should receive time to speak. No judgemental terms should be used and everything communicated should be treated with respect and seriousness.

Developing and maintaining trust among staff and convincing them that they really can express their opinion requires patience, skill and sincerity. If you do not want initiative and input, do not solicit it. However, if you do not lend an ear to staff gripes, the library "gripevine" will quickly become a counterproductive and destructive means of communication, which will undermine valiant efforts to restore constructive communication. Solicit, acknowledge and act upon what your staff communicates to you.

It is easy for the library leader to sit in her office and pretend everything is wonderful. But to truly lead, you must acknowledge all staff concerns and deal with them. Every communication is important. Your hurry or disinterest will

generate more problems.

One of the functions of a leader is to absorb stress. The most efficient way to deal with staff stress is to talk about it, formally and informally. If your library has a union or staff association, it is incumbent upon the library leader to initiate contact with the representative and to maintain a dialogue. Waiting until grievances are filed will not ingratiate you with staff association members.

If a dialogue is maintained through uneventful times, communication may be more effective during strained times. It is advisable to confer with the staff representative regarding important issues such as overtime, use of substitutes, evening schedules, leaves of absence, job classifications and other issues which could conceivably cause conflict.
Chain-of-command and communication channels should be clearly delineated so that staff know to whom, when and how to formally file grievances or to informally discuss problem situations.

Staff that are organized as a labor unit are not the enemy. They are simply looking out for their interests, just as the library leaders are looking out for theirs. Common practice should include having a staff representative at each Library Board meeting. Notes taken by that representative and distributed to the entire staff within one week after the Board meeting will help squelch unfounded rumors. Misinformation and lack of information are the causes of many internal staff conflict.

When handling staff issues as a whole, phrase

communication in the collective. Say "we need to accomplish such and so," rather than "I want you to do this." Place responsibility for decision-making in the hands of the persons it most affects. Staff with a vested interest in an issue will weigh all sides carefully and arrive at a solution that is practical and satisfactory to all parties concerned.

In both one-on-one and group communication recognize accomplishments of staff members and learn to give credit to your staff. In the credit-blame game, credit motivates more than blame. Learn to say "That was my mistake." Take full responsibility for what goes wrong in the library and give full credit to your staff for all that is right with the library. Library leaders who are glory-hogs end up getting burned by the limelight as the staff realizes that they cannot shine, no matter how good they are at their jobs. Staff in this situation soon experience burn-out. Why should they even try if the library leader does not communicate to them their importance and recognize the
significant contribution they make in providing library service? A library leader must provide extrinsic reward in the form of praise as well as intrinsic reward in the form of interesting and challenging work for each staff member.

A library leader should serve as a role model for the entire staff. Courtesy is contagious. "Please" and "thank you" should be part of your everyday vocabulary and should be used liberally. Positive communication creates a civilized, sane working environment which reflects mutual respect and

consideration. Staff members are more likely to be flexible regarding work assignments, scheduling and other issues if the library leader has demonstrated her own flexibility and adaptability.

Every day will not always be a Mr. Rogers kind of day and anger can be expressed, as needed, in an appropriate manner. Destructive or unproductive anger, yelled in someone's face, would be "What do you do all day? Why didn't you submit this book order on time? What do you think, we have nothing better to do than to wait around for you to get good and ready to do your work? Watch your step, Ms. Know-nothing!"

Constructive anger, communicated in a normal tone of voice, would be "I am angry that you did not submit your book order on time. This creates more work for the acquisitions clerk and will delay book processing. This means that patrons will not receive the new books when we agreed they would. Do not miss your deadline again or I will place a written reprimand in your personnel file."

Poison pen memos and testy tirades are communication suicide. The best way to alienate staff is to reprimand them in writing before you have talked with them face-to-face about an issue. And when you do talk to them, make sure it is in private, not in front of colleagues, or even worse, patrons. If you notice that two pages have been chatting during work time, ask them both to step into the workroom. Then proceed to explain the problem.

There is a three-part method to resolve conflict. First,

tell the person directly what she is doing that is a problem for you. Next, suggest a resolution and solicit her feedback. Third, listen to what she says and react to it. For example, "Gloria, when you leave the reference desk unattended, patrons come to my office for assistance and I am not able to complete my work. Could you make it a point to stay at the desk or to use the bell system?" Remain rational and the communication will be effective. Let the anger control you and the issue will remain unresolved and will be likely to worsen.

Keep negative occurences in their proper perspective and do not create problems where there does not have to be any. Explosions of verbal or written anger are not readily forgotten or forgiven. The disgruntled staff member can be detrimental to overall employee morale, as she starts the "gripevine" in motion. You expect your staff to be civil to patrons, no matter what and the staff should be able to expect equal treatment from library leaders. Be aware also that often it is not what you say, but the tone you say it in, that reflects true meaning. Remember to think before you communicate.

How you view yourself as a leader and communicator affects how you are viewed by the staff. If you expect your every dictate to be blindingly implemented the staff will be automotons who begrudgingly go through the motions of work, counting the minutes until they can go home. If you recognize that you just happen to have the credentials, knowledge, experience and professionalism to provide leadership, the staff

will realize that their contributions are appreciated and they will serve the public in a conscientious, caring and intelligent manner.

As the library leader it is imperative that you recognize the importance of each staff position. You have hired qualified individuals and you should have confidence in their ability to perform their job duties. Too many library leaders seem to be graduates of Maven University. Recognize that even though you are the administrative leader of the staff, you do not automatically know what is the most efficient, sensible way to perform each library function.

To sit in your office and issue memorandums about programs that should be implemented at each branch is counterproductive. Learn the strengths of each staff member and take advantage of those assets. Talk one-on-one with the Branch Librarian to ask her what she thinks are the program needs in that library's neighborhood. She knows if patrons and potential patrons are interested in local history, crafts, travel, etc. Unless you live or work in that community, it would be difficult for you to know that.

By involving staff members in the decision-making process that affects their area of job responsibility, you will be communicating to them loud and clear that they are important. And every person on this planet wants to feel important. People want to be needed, to make a difference. Democracy can be time-consuming and at times humbling for the library leader, but in the long-run, your staff will be more loyal and

productive because of it.

Communicate to the staff your interest in all aspects of the library through action. Attend branch events and staff association outings. Offer to bake for the Friends of the Library annual tea. Make yourself an integral part of all library happenings, not an aloof observer who prefers to sit behind a desk all day instead of walk to the audiovisual department to browse through the new compact discs and talk with the AV clerk.

Communicating effectively requires time and effort. It is a process. If you do explode in anger one day, get back on track as soon as possible. Apologize for your outburst or whatever communication failure you demonstrated and move on.

In all communication, follow the Gumby role-model: be flexible. Flexibility is an important communication and leadership trait. Be flexible and open to new ideas and you will be delighted at the good ideas you and the staff can discover and implement.